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Indonesia: prisoners' release -- first step towards redressing past wrongs

The announced release of 52 prisoners of conscience and political prisoners -- including 10 elderly men imprisoned for three decades -- is a welcome step on the road towards human rights reform in Indonesia, Amnesty International said today.

“The prisoner releases demonstrate the government’s recognition of the need to address past wrongs -- including the imprisonment of individuals for their peaceful activities and convictions after unfair political trials,” the organization added.

“It is vital now that the Habibie Government ensures that such human rights violations do not happen again and that Indonesian citizens will never again be locked away for disagreeing with the government,” Amnesty International said, calling for the legislation under which these people have been imprisoned to be repealed.

Despite the announced releases, at least 20 Indonesian and East Timorese prisoners of conscience remain in prison, including Budiman Sudjatmiko, the leader of the People’s Democratic Party (*Partai Rakyat Demokratik, PRD*).

“Now is the time for Indonesia to really break with its repressive past by releasing all the remaining prisoners of conscience,” Amnesty International said, urging the authorities to implement legislative and institutional reforms immediately to protect freedom of belief and expression, and to create an independent judiciary.

The government should also ensure that the convictions against more than a hundred Indonesian and East Timorese political prisoners jailed after unfair political trials are reviewed by an independent body.

Among those being released are 40 Acehenese prisoners accused of secessionist activities. Two of these, Hazbi Abdullah and Mulkan Usman, were arrested in 1990 and severely tortured before being sentenced to 17 years and 15 years’ imprisonment respectively. Both were prisoners of conscience. The releases were announced 24 hours before President Habibie is due to visit the province.

“We are delighted that the Indonesian government is taking measures to redress the appalling human rights violations that have taken place in Aceh. However, prisoner releases are only the beginning,” Amnesty International said.

Redressing past wrongs should also include measures that ensure that the truth emerge about the fate of those killed or “disappeared”, that those responsible are brought to justice and that the victims and their families are compensated.

Background

The 52 prisoners whose release has been announced also include ten elderly men who were jailed in connection with the alleged coup in 1965. Most had been imprisoned for more than three decades and all suffer ill-health.

The Habibie Government has released or removed parole restrictions on around 230 prisoners or former prisoners since coming to power in May 1998.

At least 18 Indonesian prisoners of conscience remain in prison, including eight members of the People's Democratic Party (*Partai Rakyat Demokratik*, PRD) and its affiliated organizations, despite the fact that the PRD itself has been registered as a political party and is expected to take part in national parliamentary elections in June 1999. In addition, dozens of Indonesian political prisoners remain imprisoned following convictions after unfair political trials.

Two East Timorese men are still serving prison sentences for their peaceful involvement in political activities and around 60 East Timorese remain jailed following conviction after unfair political trials for alleged involvement in violent offences.

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